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Within-country archetypes: best chance for climate change mitigation

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For at least two decades now, the world's nations have collectively labored to deal with the predicament of climate change. Though not entirely fruitless, their joint efforts have culminated largely in treaties that failed to produce many tangible results and that lack the teeth to enforce the few results they have produced. Acknowledging that climate change is already upon us, Lee G. Branstetter and William A. Pizer look past the international failures and envision a future in which mitigation takes place at the local, regional, and national levels, yet has worldwide consequences. In their paper titled "[Facing the climate change challenge in a global economy](#)" (National Bureau of Economic Research, working paper no. 18214, July 2012), Branstetter and Pizer point out the failures of the Kyoto and Cancún agreements reached in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and suggest instead a strategy that brings together those nations which are separately willing to experiment with climate change policy. Implementing a variety of policies—some good, some not so good—these nations could serve as examples for other nations, which could observe the policies and then adopt those which work. That way, the world could forgo the failed international agreements of the past and the necessity of entering into new international agreements in the future. In effect, initial unilateral action by some countries will offer its successes for other countries to adopt.

The authors offer five arguments in support of how a variety of unilateral approaches could ultimately coalesce to a global approach: (1) dealing with the effects of climate change will become increasingly necessary for countries that lag behind the initiators; (2) higher incomes in lagging countries will lead to greater environmental concern; (3) innovation in initiator countries may result in better, cheaper solutions that lagging nations will also adopt; (4) policy experience will give both initiators and laggards confidence in both the policies themselves and each other's capacity to enact and enforce them; and (5) border measures—tariffs that tax the carbon in goods offered for trade by lagging countries—that initiator countries will inevitably have to adopt will encourage the lagging countries to join the initiator ones.

Thus, what started out as a collection of bold and distinct unilateral approaches, in contrast to the failed international approach of the Kyoto and Cancún agreements, could in the end turn into a robust, this-time-successful global endeavor to meet the challenge of mitigating climate change. The authors note that ultimately a global approach is necessary to stabilize atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases. Of course, this entire scenario is predicated on a group of nations being willing and able to lead the way by enacting the measures necessary to set the world on its climatic—and climactic—odyssey.